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DE RUEHAR #1420/01 3081640
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FM AMEMBASSY ACCRA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7190
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 ACCRA 001420

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2018

TAGS: [GH](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: GHANA ELECTIONS: A GATHERING STORM?

REF: A. A. ACCRA 1048
Q B. B. ACCRA 1360

Classified By: POL:GPERGL

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. Ghana's political campaign has become increasingly strident, with the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) party accusing the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) of unbridled corruption, involvement in narcotics trafficking, and the development of a sophisticated strategy to steal the election. The NPP for its part is planting seeds of distrust among the electorate, saying openly that Ghana's democracy is in danger as long as the "revolutionary wing of the NDC" (Read: Jerry Rawlings) continues to have significant influence in the party. The ruling party has also expressed concern that the NDC will not accept the outcome of the election, inferring that the opposition is already laying the groundwork to dispute the election results so that it can resort to violence in the face of an election loss. Both parties view the election as a potentially do-or-die event with their futures in the breach. Both parties also have a deeply held conviction that they will win, even in the absence of reliable polling data that might attune them to their true strength and prepare them for the possibility of defeat. It should not be surprising that tensions are rising between the major contenders who view themselves as so close to power that they can prevail by manipulating the electorate, the process, and public perceptions by just a little bit. Despite this, Ghana's non-violent culture and its political history suggest that widespread civil insurrection is very unlikely, and the Embassy is convinced that sufficient structural regulations are in place to assure a free and fair election.
END
SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) The 2008 election in Ghana is shaping up to be the most acrimonious and bitterly contested in the nation's history. Since the founding of Ghana's fourth republic in 1992, the nation has held four presidential elections, with a first-ever peaceful transfer of power from one party to another taking place in

the
2000 election. Despite some irregularities, all those
elections
were proclaimed generally free and fair, and parties and
voters
in each case accepted the results.

¶3. (C) The 2008 contest is the first in which no incumbent president or vice president is running, and the stakes are particularly high for both major parties. The NPP has a visceral fear and hatred of the NDC, stemming from days when that party's predecessor jailed and exiled its founding fathers. The party may also be troubled by the prospect of an NDC government conducting investigations into NPP corruption during the Kufuor administration. The paranoia over the re-ascendancy of the NDC's populist patriarch Jerry Rawlings (President of Ghana, 1992-2000), whom the Kufuor government constantly surveils, has continued unabated.

¶4. (C) On the other hand, the NDC sees this election as a make-or-break watershed event. Failure to gain power at this juncture could prove to be the death knell of the party, inducing a significant portion of its supporters to defect to other parties, including the emerging Convention Peoples Party (CPP), which is perceived to be gaining considerable ground under the canny campaign of its flag-bearer, Paa Kwesi Nduom. The NDC further asserts that

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the Kufuor government has used "fast-track" courts and legislation covering "willful cause of loss to the state" selectively against its political opponents. A particularly egregious example of selective prosecution occurred just this week when an NDC parliamentary candidate was sentenced to 12 months hard labor for registering twice to vote. "Fast-track" indeed: the candidate was arrested October 27, tried and convicted the next day, and was carrying out his sentence on October 29. Both NDC and NPP officials may feel vulnerable to similar efforts in the future. More than anything, the NDC fears that four more years of NPP power will inevitably lead to an NPP dynasty with tentacles so entrenched in all areas of governance that it will be impossible for any party to unseat it in the future. The discovery of significant amounts of offshore oil and the perception that the ruling party will have access to those revenues have only heightened the stakes.

A VOLATILE ATMOSPHERE...

¶5. (SBU) The political campaign began to intensify with the voter registration exercise, which was scheduled for May but did not take place until late July. The process was marred by incidents of partisan violence and accusations from both parties of packing the voter register with ineligible voters in party stronghold areas (reftel A). The Electoral Commission (EC), an independent entity responsible for all aspects of Ghanaian elections, has been behind schedule for every critical deadline, leading to accusations of foot-dragging and incompetence. Despite its claim that the government has provided full funding for its needs, the EC managed to procure only 2,500 workstations for 5,000 registration centers during the registration period, and minority parties vehemently protested that their areas of strength were shortchanged. Attempts by the Electoral Commission (EC) to encourage the scrubbing of voter rolls have been halfhearted and unconvincing. As a result, the NDC harbors deep suspicions about government interference and collusion with the EC, and claims that the easiest way to steal an election is to

underfund the entity responsible for conducting elections.
(NOTE: This situation wasn't helped by the NPP's luck in drawing the coveted first spot on the ballot earlier this week in a random number drawing amongst the 7 parties fielding presidential candidates. END NOTE.)

¶6. (SBU) Other factors have led to a sense of anxiety surrounding the elections. Unresolved ethnic conflicts are spilling over to partisan politics. In the northern District of Yendi, where a chieftancy dispute resulted in the vicious murder of the Dagbon king and 40 of his Andani subjects in 2002, the NDC has taken up the cause of the Andanis, while the NPP now supports the rival Abudus. This politicization of ethnic and chieftancy conflicts has been replicated in other troubled parts of Ghana (Tamale, Gushiegu, and the Ga traditional areas), encouraging hardened factions to tie their fortunes to the fate of a political party. The possibility of these smoldering conflicts being re-ignited by blocs who have been waiting for their party to come to power in order to even scores is further cause for worry.

¶7. (C) The specter of so-called monetization of elections--the sense that Ghana's democracy can be delivered to the highest bidder--further adds to pre-election unease. It is a given that the NPP has the ability to blow away its rivals in election spending. In addition, it has the advantage of incumbency, giving it superior access to state resources, particularly at the district level. (The NPP presidential aspirant is the only candidate who moves around the country with dispatch riders and police escorts.) State media organs do give space to opposition candidates, but tout government spending projects in a manner that pushes the envelope of neutrality. (NOTE: A USG-funded code of conduct for state media is helping to address this. END
NOTE.) Billboards depicting NPP government achievements are cropping up all over Accra, presumably funded by the state.

...AND A PERVERSIVE ENVIRONMENT OF MUTUAL SUSPICION

¶8. (C) Poloff met recently with Alban Bagbin, the minority leader in Parliament, who laid down a stunning indictment of NPP tactics. He accused the NPP of wholesale bribery of large parts of the electorate, saying that "they are taking

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millions of Cedis to NDC strongholds and buying the voter ID cards of likely NDC supporters." He accused the NPP and Kufuor administration of having strong ties to and reaping millions of dollars from narcotics traffickers who have extensive networks in Ghana that include members of Parliament, deputy ministers, and high ranking police officials. He said that NPP candidate Nana Dankwa Akufo-Addo is well-known to be a cocaine user himself, who has "supposedly stopped, but I don't believe that."

¶9. (C) Hanna Tetteh, the NDC's communications director, gave Poloff a document that the NDC purports to be from the minutes of an NPP meeting in which the ruling party details its plans to rig the election in collaboration with a complicit Electoral Commission (reftel B). Impossible to authenticate, and roundly rejected by the NPP as "lies and insults," the document's purported strategies are:
-- furnishing all party offices with heavy duty color printers to reproduce EC ballots and pre-stuffing them into fake ballot boxes to be switched in selected polling stations where favorable and selected police personnel will be stationed. (NOTE: In Embassy's opinion, switching ballot boxes would be difficult without the complicity of the NDC's polling agents. Because the NDC believes that many of its polling agents were bribed by the NPP in 2004, one of their key strategies has been to carefully select and

train hardcore party loyalists to serve as polling agents.

END NOTE);

-- sending a special ink for marking ballots in polling places in NDC strongholds. The ink, which does not dry quickly, would cause the thumbprints used by voters to mark their ballots to smear when folded and placed in the ballot box, thus spoiling the ballot. NPP polling agents would insist that the EC's presiding officer invalidate those ballots;

-- Preparing fake ballot boxes stuffed with NDC ballots and parading them out to the media at hastily arranged press conferences to indicate NDC attempts at fraud;

-- calling for loyalist members of Parliament and District Chief Executives to reduce the number of buses operating in NDC strongholds on election day.

¶10. (C) For its part, the NPP has accused the NDC of deliberately spreading untrue rumors of its collusion with the Electoral Committee and of creating a false sense of alarm with "ceaseless talk of following the examples of Kenya and Zimbabwe." The party has also spread the word that Rawlings was pulling together members of the infamous 64th Battalion (the elite corps of commandos trained in Cuba to become Rawlings' armed bodyguards after the coup of 1981) to serve as polling agents and provocateurs in key districts. Another rumor of NDC cadres being trained in Libya to disrupt the elections was circulating a few months ago.

MEET THE CANDIDATES

¶11. (C) Despite party platforms that tend to blur into one another, Ghanaians are being presented with a clear choice in terms of the personalities of the major party candidates. The NPP's Akufo-Addo can best be described as a patrician's patrician, a member not only of the dominant Akans, but also an Akyem, an ethnic group that tends to consider itself a rung above the bluest of bluebloods. He is the scion of a political family of considerable renown, and his father was Chief Justice of the Ghana Supreme Court and President of Ghana from 1970-72. Akufo-Addo earned degrees in economics and law in England and Ghana, and began practicing law in Accra in 1979. He became active in human rights and political causes during the Rawlings years, and joined the NPP in 1992. He was the principal author of "The Stolen Verdict," a 1993 NPP political tract that brought about numerous election reforms. Elected to Parliament in 1996, he became an outspoken critic of the Rawlings government. After failing to gain the NPP's nomination in 2000, he strongly supported John Kufuor's candidacy, and was rewarded with the post of Attorney General and Minister of Justice, a perfect platform for him to pursue investigations and prosecutions of Rawlings-era corruption. He became Foreign Minister in the second Kufuor administration, where he remained until resigning to pursue election as president in 2007.

¶12. (C) Akufo-Addo is a man who feels that his time has come. While disappointed over losing the party nod to Kufuor in 2000, he waited patiently for 8 years, and then fended off a strong primary challenge from Alan Kyerematen, who had Kufuor's overt support. (NOTE: Kyerematen, a former Minister of Trade and Industry and Ghana's ambassador to

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the US from 2001-2003, is now known everywhere in Ghana as "Alan Cash" in reference to the large sums of money he handed out during the primary campaign. After losing the primaries, he quit the party in a fit of pique, but like many other primary contenders, he was wooed back by Akufo-Addo and now plays a major role in the campaign. END NOTE) Akufo-Addo talks about the "big weight of history on my shoulders," and in watching his performance as a candidate, one is struck by a strong sense of entitlement, as though he can hardly imagine Ghanaians having the poor

judgment to elect anyone besides him. He has mostly healed the inevitable party rifts caused by a primary contested by nearly a dozen NPP heavy hitters, and has amassed campaign funds that far outpace the competition. Full page ads for Akufo-Addo appear almost daily in the major newspapers, and half-hour specials labeled "Nana's Diary" grace the primetime airwaves at least twice a week. His smiling and bespectacled countenance radiates down from dozens of gargantuan billboards that have sprouted up all over Accra. (NOTE: A Lebanese businessman who owns many of Accra's billboards told the Ambassador recently that he is not paid for most of the billboards for the two major parties. END NOTE.) Akufo-Addo is a gifted orator, but has a hard time connecting with the common man. He engages on the issues, but speaks in terms of macro-economic growth, annual 6% increases in GDP, the effect on Ghana of instability in world markets, and infrastructure development. Although he is often seen drawing large numbers of supporters at campaign stops around the country, he can't escape persistent rumors that they are rent-a-crowds.

¶13. (C) Like Akufo-Addo, John Evans Atta-Mills, the opposition NDC candidate, obtained degrees in economics and law in England. He then lectured at the University of Ghana for 25 years, and is always referred to as "Prof." Atta-Mills became Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service in 1988, and used that unlikely springboard to enter politics and serve as Jerry Rawlings vice president from 1996 to 2000. Atta-Mills is making his third consecutive run for the presidency--not usually a recipe for success. A party insider told Poloff that Atta-Mills had won the nomination from a reluctant but destitute party whose only choice was to field a candidate with instant name and face recognition. His polling numbers in the past two elections were a respectable 44%, and this time around, the NDC seems convinced that dissatisfaction with the NPP will turn Atta-Mills into a winner.

¶14. (C) Although he is not an exciting campaigner, Atta-Mills still manages to draw large crowds of enthusiastic supporters, even during his campaign swing through the NPP's stronghold Ashanti Region. Mills campaigns on a populist platform of "prosperity for all," with a strong emphasis on the "all." He hammers away at what he characterizes as Ghana's high level of unemployment, corruption, declining living standards for the masses, and the gap between the urban haves and the rural have-nots. Strapped for cash, Atta-Mills has opted for a retail campaign strategy that puts him in a car and plies him from town to town in regions with large numbers of swing voters. He has concentrated his efforts in the Western and Central regions, while his well-respected running mate John Mahama takes the same style campaign to the Brong-Ahafo, Eastern, and Northern regions where his popularity is greatest. The party's grassroots organization has been re-energized, and Atta-Mills' strategy appears to be paying political dividends. In recent weeks he has stepped up his attacks on the Kufuor administration, and his bold assertions of pervasive administration corruption (see para 17) have drawn a sharp rebuke and a threat of retaliation in the courts from the usually reticent President.

THE RAWLINGS FACTOR

¶15. (C) Former President Jerry Rawlings has been a key player in the NDC campaign, a larger than life presence whose populist touch and bombast rouse crowds that reach beyond the party faithful. NDC communications director Tetteh told Poloff that Rawlings was "a blessing and a curse," vital to the cause for his charismatic appeal, but equally risky as a loose cannon who sometimes loses sight of his role. Despite such misgivings, the NDC has happily unleashed Rawlings as the attack dog on the current administration's shortcomings. Rawlings' high profile leads

some to believe that he would play a key policy role in an Atta-Mills government, but his party rejects that assertion.

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"Rawlings realizes his political days are over," Tetteh said, "and the party has definitely moved beyond him, but managing him is still a challenge." Akufo-Addo constantly reminds the electorate of the authoritarian Rawlings years, labeling the NDC as a party with a non-democratic tradition. Insinuating that Atta-Mills is Rawlings' puppet, he holds that democracy is not safe in NDC hands. Speaking to the diplomatic corps last week, he said "Ghanaians are pondering whether a vote for Professor Mills is indeed a vote for him or someone else. Will a President Mills be his own man?"

IT'S THE CORRUPTION, STUPID

16.(C) Perceptions often win elections, and the image in the public mind of ministers feeding at the government trough while the common man suffers may become the key factor in this contest. Corruption has deep roots in the Ghanaian political culture, and to a large degree, society accepts and expects patronage and largesse as part and parcel of an office-holder's prerogatives. A powerful executive branch with little oversight or regulation, low remuneration for civil servants and security agencies, opacity in the procurement process, and a prevailing sense of official impunity all create a system that is hospitable to corruption. While President Kufuor loudly trumpeted zero-tolerance for corruption upon taking office in 2000, those horns have been quieter in his second term. Even in the absence of a smoking gun, in the waning months of the administration, many believe that officials are stuffing their pockets before the train leaves the station. A Lebanese businessman with strong ties to the administration told Poloff last week that "you no longer can go to a minister and speak in terms of five figures. If you aren't offering six figures, they don't want to see you."

17. (C) The government is a major player in business in Ghana, and it dominates many spheres of economic activity. Those points of contact where the public and private sectors come together are the areas most susceptible to corruption. The NDC continues to make allegations of the government's complicity in this arena, questioning the final disposition of funds from the sale of Ghana Telecom to Vodafone in August for \$900 million, asserting that several prominent NPP members have stashed millions of dollars in foreign banks, and suggesting (in the Weekly Standard, which is published by a former Rawlings aide) that Kufuor owes \$5 billion to an unnamed group of Kuwaiti oil suppliers. While the assertion regarding Kufuor sounds absurd, the accusations resonate with at least parts of the electorate.

WHITHER THE ELECTION?

118. (C) A chorus of informed and impartial observers, NGOs, and think tanks has recently raised the alarm over the disturbing trends they are seeing as the election draws near. All of the minority opposition parties came together at a Council of State function last week and roundly condemned the two major parties for fomenting tension in the country and increasing the electorate's anxiety. On October 27, the Center for Democratic Development, a respected think tank that closely monitors the election (with a USAID grant), summoned the diplomatic corps and other development partners to an "emergency meeting." At this session, the CDD's director said that his previous optimism for free and fair elections has been significantly challenged by the trends his organization sees in the campaigns of the two major political parties and the complacency of the Electoral Commission. He cited a litany of emerging flashpoints that included the bloated voter

register, NDC distrust of the Electoral Commission's bona fides, government failures to prosecute officials accused of corruption, and State inaction in settling unresolved ethnic conflict. The primary concern of the CDD panel stemmed from the expressed contention of most opposition parties that the security agencies, the judiciary, the media, and large segments of civil society could not be trusted. In essence, they said, this means that every potential party with a role in adjudicating election results is suspected of complicity. The panel also expressed their shared apprehension that the security forces were not equipped to deal with multiple instances of civil unrest on election day.

¶19. (C) Compare and contrast this gloomy scenario with the sense of serenity that the Ambassador found just two hours later in the quiet confines of the Electoral Commission during a call on Chairman Kwado Afari-Gyan. When asked

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about the ongoing debate over registration irregularities, perceptions of EC failings, and the imperfect exercise to cleanse voter rolls, Afari-Gyan dismissed all of these problems out of hand, promising that there would be absolutely no troubles come election day. He claimed that the case of discrepancies in voter registration in the Ashanti region (wherein 13 constituencies posted gains of more than 100% in 2 years) had been caused by a mere computer error, an allegation that the NDC disputes and that the embassy finds implausible given the evidence at hand. When told that the Embassy's LES political assistant had visited several District Electoral Commissions in the Brong-Ahafo and Northern regions and had been told that the EC had been delinquent in making payments for salaries and fuel, Afari-Gyan disputed the information, saying that everyone was being paid on time and that the EC was fully funding all operations. (NOTE: Embassy political assistant calls that claim patently false. END NOTE). Finally, the Chairman said that the voter exhibition and cleansing had gone extremely well, and that the EC was completely satisfied with the state of the register. Once again, this does not jibe with media reports or observations from independent election observers. Afari-Gyan's assurances of a trouble-free election beg the question of whether the EC knows something that the masses outside its gates do not, or whether he has simply declared his office a reality-free zone. If he does know something the public does not, he must work to increase public confidence in the electoral process.

¶20. (C) In the absence of reliable polling data that might help attune them to their true strength and prepare them for the possibility of defeat, both major parties are convinced that they will prevail. This does not appear to be partisan posturing, but rather a deeply held conviction. Both also view the election as a potentially do-or-die event, with their futures in the breach. As such, it should not be surprising that tensions are rising between the major contenders who view themselves as so close to power that they can prevail by manipulating the electorate, the process, and public perceptions by just a little bit. The Chairman of the EC asserted that both parties are involved in electoral "mischief" in their strongholds, particularly voter intimidation.

¶21. (C) As they continue down the road of political brinksmanship, it appears that at least elements of the two major parties are willing to take greater risks with future stability in order to control the levers of power. We hear some politicians, for example, making vague references to power sharing in Kenya and declaring that a loss would be "unacceptable." Post believes, however, that even if a Ghanaian political party rejects the

democratic process, few Ghanaians will follow. Ghana's non-violent culture and political history suggest that widespread civil insurrection is very unlikely, and the Embassy is convinced that sufficient structural regulations are in place to assure a free and fair election.

¶21. Ambassador and other Embassy officials continue to send out the same message to all parties: the United States is neutral in this election; we expect all parties to play by the rules in a process that is free, fair, and transparent; any challenges to the results should be pursued through the judicial system; as long as the elections are free and fair, the victor can be assured of continued US good will and cooperation; and any call for a power-sharing arrangement would not be well-received by the United States and would not be in Ghana's best interests.

TEITELBAUM